Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Freeport

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The morning of August 27, 1858, dawned cold and gray, but the dreary conditions did not dispel the excitement that buzzed through the town of Freeport, Illinois. It was the day that the celebrated Lincoln-Douglas Debates came to Freeport. Little did these people there know the effect that this debate would have on the United States of America, the laws of Illinois, and Freeport itself. As a result of the Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Freeport, old wounds were reopened, raising once again the issues of slavery and popular sovereignty and plunging the people of Illinois into a riotous argument that eventually impacted the entire country.

From the time the first settlers landed on the Virginia coast, slavery was an issue in America, and the growing population called for some sort of law to govern it. To cope with the demands of the states, the Missouri Compromise was signed. The Missouri Compromise decreed that all states above the thirty-sixth line of latitude were free, while those below it were slave. This solution quieted the argument for a few years, but the rebirth of this controversial topic was inevitable. Several more laws were passed in the next few years, unintentionally giving most of the power to the North.

With the admission of Alabama into the Union, there were eleven states in the North and eleven in the South. But although the number of states was equal, the number of representatives in each sanction was quite lopsided. In the House, the North had much more power than did the South. At that time, the North had one hundred and five congressmen, the South only eighty-one. This myriad of arguments was what triggered

the Missouri Compromise; lawmakers hoped that it would keep the balance between the slave and free states.

Then suddenly, Texas wanted to join the Union too, sparking a fresh debate in the war of words between the slave and free states. The South, predictably, wanted Texas to be slave; the North wished it to be free. As a result, Congress passed a joint resolution authorizing the admission of Texas. This bill also stated that up to four new states should thereafter be entitled to admission, with the Missouri Compromise to govern whether they were slave or free.

Unfortunately, the admission of Texas also helped provoke the Mexican War, which gained the United States the territories of California and New Mexico. It was assumed by the people of those territories that New Mexico and California would be free states, and so California promptly formed a free state constitution. But the South would not give up so easily, as all of New Mexico and the southern half of California should be under the influence of slavery, as decreed by the Missouri Compromise. They proposed an extension of the Missouri Compromise, but the residents of the territories wished to remain free, as they had been under Mexican laws.

This is where the idea of popular sovereignty sprang up. Popular sovereignty was the suggestion that the people of a territory should be able to choose for themselves whether they would be under the influence of slavery or not. Douglas was an avid supporter of this proposal; Lincoln thought slavery should be banned from the territories altogether. At the debate in Freeport, this issue came officially out into the open. In his opening speech, Lincoln posed this question: "Can the people of a United States Territory . . . exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State Constitution?"

Douglas responded with an emphatic "yes," winning him the senatorial election of 1858 but dooming him to failure in the presidential race two years later.

At the time of the senatorial elections of 1858, several French families lived in Illinois. They had traveled up the Mississippi before the Louisiana Purchase had been made. They brought their slaves with them, and for a while their right to keep their slaves went uncontested. But soon their neighbors protested the laws that allowed them, and no one else, to own slaves in the state of Illinois. Lincoln, a strong abolitionist, wanted the French to be no exception, and had strong support among the people. But Douglas won the election; at that time, elections were decided by the state legislature. Douglas beat Lincoln fifty-four votes to forty-six.

Douglas' answer to Lincoln's fateful question had an enormous impact on national history. Two years after the senatorial election, Lincoln and Douglas found themselves facing each other once again; this time they vied for the presidency. But that single crucial question made Douglas an unfit candidate to the vast majority of the people in the South, and so Lincoln won the presidency. Then the southern states seceded, and the Civil War descended upon the nation, tearing brother from brother, father from son. Soon Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves, who wasted no time in traveling up to the North to fight for the Union cause. Eager to back up their president, the people of the Union encouraged Lincoln, and the people of Illinois were some of those people. Individual families, entire towns, even world famous businesses, such as the whiskey business of Peoria, Illinois, sent their support. Because of the determination of Lincoln and his people, the United States of America was reunited and slavery abolished for all time.

The Freeport debate, and, more specifically, Lincoln's critical question, shaped the entire history of the United States. Without the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, the French might still have their slaves, and the Union might be made up of only the free states of the 1800s, the southern states having split off to form their own country. Slavery might still be a factor, with thousands of innocent humans forced to work for free. The world would be devoid of the powerful figure of the United States of America. Without the Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Freeport, Lincoln might never have become president, and so half of the United States would be denied freedom. [From LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom*; Lionel Crocker, *An Analysis of Lincoln and Douglas as Public Speakers and Debaters*; John J. Dunphy, "Lincoln Douglas Debate at Alton." *Illinois Magazine* (1973); John Hay, and John G. Nicolay. *Abraham Lincoln*; Jerry Klein, *A Pictorial History*; *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates.* 12 Feb. 1991. National Park Service. <http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debates2.htm> (Aug. 27, 2007); Marian Mills Miller, *Life and Works of Abraham Lincoln*; Ralph G. Newman, *Lincoln for the Ages*; and W. T. Rawleigh, *Freeport's Lincoln*.]